

Review
Measuring the Public's Health
by Thacker, Stroup, Carande-Kulis, Marks, Roy and Gerberding

The main objective of this paper is to review traditional public health measures, and to advance the thesis that alternative measures of public health are necessary. The objectives are clearly stated. The review of the traditional public health measures is good. The overall conclusions and recommendations are well-supported. My summary opinion is that the paper is a thoughtful discussion of how to measure the public's health, and is an important contribution.

I have a few specific suggestions.

1. The section on "characteristics of useful measures of the public's health could perhaps be expanded (page 9).

For example, the sentence "the measure should detect both an absolute and relative change in health status over time" raised some questions. Perhaps it would help clarify matters if the authors gave an example of a measure that would not meet this criterion. The authors cite an example of percentage change but that would seem to be a relative rather than an absolute measure. Relative risks or attributable risks" would seem to meet only the relative change criteria.

The characteristic that a "measure should be reliable, stable over time" should be clarified. Here, I assume that the authors are referring to the notion that the way the measurements are made should be consistent over time, but of course the value of the measurement could well change because of trends in time.

Overall, I think this particular section could be strengthened considerably with some examples of measure that do or do not meet the specific criteria of useful measures of public's health.

2. I think the last two sentences of the paper either need a slight rewrite or earlier sections need to be strengthened to make clear what the authors are referring to. For example, the authors refer to "the tools proposed in this article", but it was not clear what specific tools the authors are referring to. Similarly, in the last sentence there is reference to the "new paradigm" but this is the first reference to a "new paradigm" and it is not clear which paradigm the authors are referring to.
3. I liked Figure 1. Ideally, it would have been better if the alternative measures could have been based on the same year. For example, DALY is dated 1996, but mortality is 2002. I assume Figure 1 refers only to the United States, in which case it should be made clear in the legend. I think there could have been a few more sentences of discussion of figure 1 in the text. Perhaps the authors could comment on how the rankings change for specific causes.

Another comment on Figure 1 is that while "rankings" can be attractive, especially to the public and the media, they can also oversimplify matters. For example, two items could be ranked very differently but could be similar on the quantitative measurement scale.